The BILLIONAIRE'S REGRET

EXCLUSIVE BONUS EPILOGUE

ALISON REID

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by Alison Reid

Twenty-Three Years Later…

The Anderson estate in London was loud.

Not with business meetings or formal dinners or the endless stream of executives Michael once filled his life with.

With family.

Jace was currently storming through the kitchen because someone had eaten the leftovers he had specifically labelled with his name.

"It literally had my name on it," he complained.

Melissa didn't even glance up from the flowers she was arranging in the dining room. "You live with your father, and a staff that sneaks desserts after midnight. Labeling food was ambitious."

"It was my cheesecake."

Michael walked through the room calmly with a coffee in hand. "Weakness gets punished, son."

Jace stopped dead. "You ate it?"

Michael took a slow sip of coffee. "You'll never prove it."

Melissa rolled her eyes as Jace muttered something about corruption and injustice before disappearing back toward the kitchen.

At twenty, Jace Anderson was the complete opposite of his father at that age. Tall like Michael, broad-shouldered, and unfairly handsome, but easier

with people. Easier with affection. Melissa privately believed it was because he had grown up in a home filled with love instead of misunderstanding and silence. Michael insisted Jace inherited all his worst qualities. Melissa knew better.

The front doors opened.

"Amy?" Melissa called.

"We're home!"

Michael looked up immediately. Melissa hid a smile. Their daughter was twenty-two and fully aware her father became mildly terrifying where she was concerned.

Amy Anderson stepped into the foyer wearing a fitted cream dress, her honey-brown hair falling in soft waves down her back. She looked so much like Melissa at that age it still caught Michael off guard sometimes.

But unlike Melissa at twenty-one, Amy walked through life utterly secure in the knowledge that she was loved. And she wasn't alone. A tall young man stepped in behind her carrying overnight bags.

Dark hair.

Sharp jawline.

Confident posture.

Michael's eyes narrowed instantly.

The young man extended a hand politely. "Mr. Anderson. Mrs. Anderson. It's nice to finally meet you properly. I'm Derek Childs."

Michael looked at the offered hand like it had personally offended him. Melissa stepped in smoothly before things became awkward.

"Derek, it's lovely to meet you," she said warmly, shaking his hand. "Amy's mentioned you several times."

Amy smiled brightly. "I told you they'd be nice."

Michael finally shook Derek's hand. Firmly. Too firmly. Derek didn't react. Interesting. Michael disliked him immediately. Jace wandered into the foyer halfway through the interaction, still annoyed about the cheesecake before stopping short.

"Well," he muttered. "This feels tense."

Amy shot him a warning look.

Jace grinned. "You brought home a boyfriend. Dad looks about three seconds away from committing a felony."

"I'm standing right here," Michael said flatly.

"Exactly," Jace replied.

Melissa bit back laughter. Amy moved slightly closer to Derek anyway, her fingers brushing his wrist unconsciously. Michael noticed that too. Of course he did. His jaw tightened.

Dinner was surprisingly civil. Mostly because Melissa kept redirecting the conversation every time Michael started interrogating Derek like he was applying for national security clearance.

"So Derek," Melissa asked smoothly, "Amy said you recently finished your masters?"

"Yes, ma'am. Architecture."

Michael cut in immediately. "Family company?"

Derek nodded once. "My father owns Childs Developments."

Michael knew the name.

Old money.

Very wealthy.

Very influential.

That did not improve the situation.

“And what exactly are your intentions with my daughter?” Michael asked bluntly.

“Michael,” Melissa warned softly.

“What?” he said. “It’s a reasonable question.”

Derek remained calm under the scrutiny. “I care about Amy very much, sir.”

Amy nearly choked on her wine. “Dad, honestly.”

Michael leaned back slightly in his chair, still watching him carefully. “That wasn’t the question.”

Jace whispered loudly to Derek, “Run while you still can.”

Amy kicked him under the table.

“Ow.”

Melissa finally set her wine glass down. “Alright. That’s enough.” She gave Michael a look only a wife of twenty three years could manage. “You are not interrogating our daughter’s boyfriend like a hostile witness.”

Michael muttered something under his breath.

* * * * * * * *

After dinner, Derek and Jace disappeared toward the games room downstairs, immediately arguing over whether Formula One drivers were actual athletes.

“They pull six Gs,” Derek defended.

Jace scoffed. “They sit down for a living.”

“You literally work in finance.”

“And?”

Melissa could still hear them bickering faintly as she settled back onto the cream sofa in the living room with a glass of wine. The massive London estate was quieter now, the soft glow of the fireplace warming the room while rain tapped gently against the tall windows.

Amy lingered near the armchair opposite her parents before sighing dramatically.

"Dad, you need to be nicer."

Michael's attention shifted immediately from his scotch. "Why?"

Amy hesitated. And immediately Melissa knew. Mothers always knew.

Amy twisted her fingers together before finally saying quietly, "I love him."

Silence settled heavily over the room. Melissa's expression softened instantly.

"Oh, sweetheart."

Amy exhaled shakily. "I know we're young, but he's good to me. He listens to me. He respects me. And when I'm with him…" Her smile became helplessly genuine. "Everything feels easy."

Emotion tightened unexpectedly in Melissa's chest. Because thirty years ago she had sounded exactly the same talking about Michael.

She reached for Amy's hand gently. "Are you happy?"

Amy nodded immediately. "Really happy."

Melissa smiled warmly. "Then I'm happy too."

Amy's shoulders visibly relaxed. Michael, however, remained terrifyingly quiet.

Amy looked at him cautiously. "Dad?"

Michael stared at his daughter—the light of his life—for a long moment before finally looking away briefly, his jaw tight. When he finally spoke, his voice was lower than usual.

“You’re twenty-two.”

Amy blinked. “Yes?”

“That’s too young to fall in love.”

Melissa almost laughed.

Amy looked horrified. “Mum?”

Melissa folded her arms. “Your father and I fell in love long before I was twenty-two. You were going to propose to me when I was twenty-one, remember?”

Michael pointed at her immediately. “And look how badly that went.”

Melissa gave him a look. “That was your fault. You thought I was cheating on you.”

Amy stared at him in genuine disbelief. “Excuse me? Mum would never.” She shook her head. “You’ve been disgustingly in love for my entire life.”

Something uncomfortable flickered across Michael’s face. Ashamed.

“I made a mistake,” he admitted quietly.

“That took you five years to correct,” Melissa reminded him.

Amy frowned, looking between them now with growing confusion. “Wait… what actually happened?”

Michael leaned back heavily against the sofa, dragging a hand through his dark hair, though silver threaded through it now at the temples. Melissa watched him carefully.cEven after nearly three decades together, that particular regret still lived inside him.

Amy sat forward slowly. “Dad?”

Michael exhaled quietly before finally meeting his daughter’s eyes.

“I thought your mother betrayed me,” he said bluntly. “I walked away before giving her the chance to explain.”

Amy looked appalled. “That’s insane.”

"Yes," Melissa agreed calmly. "It was."

Michael shot her a look. She ignored it completely.

Amy stared at her father. "You just left?"

His jaw tightened. "I was twenty-five and angry enough to destroy my own life."

Melissa's expression softened slightly at that. Because she remembered that version of him too well. Proud. Devastated. Furious. Broken.

Amy looked genuinely distressed now. "But you loved Mum."

Michael laughed once without humor. "More than anything."

"Then why would you leave?"

The room went quiet for a moment.

Finally, Michael said quietly, "Because sometimes when people are hurt badly enough, they stop thinking rationally."

Melissa saw the regret move across his face again, old and familiar. Twenty-eight years later and he still carried it.

Amy looked between them before softly asking, "Were you scared?"

Michael went still. Melissa watched realisation flicker across Amy's face almost immediately afterward. Not anger. Not control. Fear.

Her father wasn't afraid Derek would hurt Amy physically. He was terrified someone would break her heart the way he had broken Melissa's. Amy's expression softened instantly.

"Oh, Dad."

Michael looked away briefly, uncomfortable with too much emotion directed at him all at once. Amy stood suddenly and crossed the room before curling herself against his side on the sofa like she had done since childhood. Despite everything, Michael's arm wrapped around her automatically.

"You don't have to worry so much," she said softly.

"Yes, I do."

Melissa smiled faintly into her wine glass. Some things never changed. Michael Anderson had spent thirty years loving her with terrifying intensity. Of course he loved their daughter the same way.

"You have no idea how quickly one mistake can destroy your life," he said quietly.

The words lingered heavily in the room. Amy studied her father for a moment, really studied him, and for the first time she seemed to fully understand that the fear beneath his protectiveness had never truly disappeared. Not after Melissa. Not after losing her once. Her expression softened before she turned toward her mother.

"Mum… when did you know you loved Dad?"

Melissa blinked slightly at the question. Beside her, Michael went completely still. Even after thirty years, he still reacted when it came to her. Melissa looked across the room at him.

At the man who had once shattered her heart.

The man who had spent decades putting it back together again. Her lips curved softly.

"I was eighteen," she said quietly. "Thirty years ago."

Michael's gaze locked onto hers.

"And it has never changed."

The room fell silent. Amy looked suddenly emotional. Because there was nothing casual about the way her parents looked at each other. Nothing ordinary. Thirty years later and the connection between them still felt almost too intimate to witness sometimes.

Like they had forgotten other people existed. Michael stared at Melissa for a long moment, something raw moving across his face before he finally spoke.

"You still remember?"

Melissa let out a soft laugh. "Michael, I remember everything."

And she did.

The first time he kissed her.

The first time he touched her hand.

The way he looked at her like she was something precious long before either of them understood what they were becoming to each other.

Michael shook his head slightly, almost like the emotion hit him too hard sometimes even now.

"You were eighteen," he repeated quietly, like he still couldn't quite believe it.

Melissa smiled faintly. "And you were already impossible."

Amy looked between them, completely invested now.

"Tell me."

Melissa laughed softly under her breath before settling back further into the sofa.

"We lived next door to each other in Sydney," she began. "Your father was a couple of years older than me. Jason—your uncle—started dating Sarah, my sister." She smiled slightly at the memory. "One day Michael came to pick Jason up, and I was standing on the front doorstep with my boyfriend at the time."

Michael scoffed immediately. "He was a tool."

Amy burst out laughing.

Melissa rolled her eyes. "His name was Daniel."

"He was still a tool."

"You barely knew him."

"I knew enough."

Amy looked delighted. "Dad, were you jealous?"

Michael took a slow sip of scotch. "No."

Melissa snorted softly. "He's lying."

Michael looked offended. "I absolutely am not."

"You glared at Daniel like you wanted him to disappear."

"He kept touching you."

Amy made a strangled noise somewhere between horror and amusement.

Melissa pointed at Michael. "Exactly like that. Same expression."

"I was perfectly calm."

"You looked homicidal."

Michael muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like reasonable reaction. Amy laughed harder.

Melissa shook her head fondly. "Anyway, your father barely spoke to me at first."

"That's because every time I came near you, you blushed and ran away."

Melissa looked appalled. "I did not run away."

"You absolutely did."

"I was eighteen!"

"You nearly walked into a hedge once because you were staring at me."

Amy covered her face. "Oh my God."

Melissa ignored both of them. "Your father was… intimidating back then."

Michael raised an eyebrow. "Back then?"

Melissa gave him a pointed look over the rim of her wine glass. "Michael Anderson, half of London is still afraid of you."

Amy immediately nodded. "That's true."

Michael looked entirely unrepentant.

Melissa continued, softer now. "But he was also protective. Loyal. And underneath all the arrogance…" Her eyes flicked toward him briefly. "He was kind."

Michael's expression shifted slightly at that. Amy noticed immediately.

"So what happened?" she asked quietly.

Melissa smiled faintly at the memory. "At first? Nothing. We just kept seeing each other because of Sarah and Jason." She laughed softly. "But your father found excuses to come over constantly."

Michael looked deeply offended. "I did not."

"You suddenly became very interested in borrowing things."

Amy frowned. "Like what?"

Melissa smiled. "Anything. Garden tools. Extension cords. A ladder once."

Michael muttered, "I needed the ladder."

"Your father owned three ladders."

Amy laughed so hard she nearly fell sideways against the sofa.

"And then," Melissa continued, "one night there was a storm and the power went out in the street. My parents and Sarah were away. I was in the house alone with the staff." She smiled faintly at the memory. "Michael turned up completely soaked."

Michael's gaze softened immediately, like he already knew exactly which memory she was talking about.

"You were scared of thunderstorms," he said quietly.

Melissa pointed at him. "I was not scared."

"You climbed into my lap."

"It was dark."

"You were shaking."

Amy stared at her mother in delight. "Mum."

Melissa ignored that entirely. "Your father wrapped me in a blanket and made me hot chocolate."

Michael looked at Amy matter-of-factly. "She drank half of it and fell asleep on me."

"And you sat there for three hours because you didn't want to wake me," Melissa added softly.

Silence settled briefly across the room. Amy looked at them like she was watching something rare. Something enduring.

Michael's gaze never left Melissa. "That was the first night I realised I was in trouble."

Melissa's smile turned softer still.

"I already knew."

Amy looked completely invested now, curled sideways on the sofa as though she never wanted the story to end.

"What happened next?"

Melissa glanced toward Michael, warmth flickering across her face.

"When I woke up, he was just sitting there looking at me." Her voice softened slightly. "Then he kissed me."

Michael's mouth curved faintly at the memory.

"It was the most romantic thing that had ever happened to me," Melissa admitted quietly.

Michael leaned back slightly, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "We were inseparable after that. No one could keep us apart."

And it was true. Everyone had known it back then. Michael and Melissa had become the centre of each other's worlds so completely it was almost frightening. University parties, beach trips, family dinners, lazy Sunday

mornings, late-night drives through Sydney with music playing too loudly—they had done everything together.

Amy could see it even now in the way they looked at each other. Like part of them still lived there.

"Including us," Melissa said softly.

Michael's expression shifted slightly. The warmth faded just enough for regret to move underneath it.

"When Michael left on my twenty-first birthday," Melissa continued quietly, "no one understood what happened. We were happy… or so everyone thought." Her eyes lowered briefly. "Including me."

The room grew still. Amy frowned slightly now, seeing the old hurt move through both of them even after all this time. Michael stared down into his scotch glass for a moment before speaking quietly.

"I thought she betrayed me."

Amy looked horrified all over again. "Over one misunderstanding?"

Michael laughed once without humor. "It wasn't a misunderstanding to me at the time."

Melissa looked at him gently now instead of angrily. Because age had softened some wounds, even if it never erased them completely.

"I spent five years thinking he stopped loving me," she admitted quietly.

Michael's head lifted immediately. "I never stopped."

The response came too fast.

Too rough.

Too honest.

Melissa's expression softened instantly. Amy looked between them silently. Thirty years later and it was still there.

That love.

That devastation.

That impossible intensity.

Michael reached across the sofa then, his fingers finding Melissa's almost absently, like instinct. Like breathing.

"I was an idiot," he said quietly.

Melissa smiled faintly. "A spectacular one."

Amy burst out laughing. And finally, after a moment, Michael did too. The sound was deeper now than it had been in his youth, roughened by age and experience, but Melissa still loved it. She always would.

Then the laughter faded. Michael's expression sobered slightly as his fingers tightened around Melissa's hand.

"I was just grateful I got a second chance," he said quietly. "And that she forgave me."

Melissa glanced at him, warmth and old heartbreak mixing together in her chest even now.

"It wasn't easy," she admitted. "But I loved him."

Michael looked at her immediately. The intensity in his eyes after all these years still had the power to make her breath catch sometimes. Amy noticed that too. It was impossible not to.

Melissa smiled faintly. "When he came back into my life, I wanted to hate him." She laughed softly under her breath. "Honestly, I tried very hard."

"You were terrifying," Michael informed Amy.

"I was hurt."

"You nearly destroyed me."

"You deserved it."

Michael accepted that with surprising ease. "Fair."

Amy shook her head slowly, completely fascinated by them. "So how did you forgive him?"

The room quieted slightly again. Melissa thought about it for a moment before answering.

"Because underneath all the anger…" Her fingers curled lightly around Michael's. "I still knew I couldn't see my life without him."

Michael went very still beside her.

Amy frowned slightly. "Even after the hurt?"

Melissa looked at her daughter carefully.

"Your father made a terrible mistake," she said softly. "But your dad proved to me he was sorry and that he loved me just as much as I loved him." Her eyes flicked briefly toward him. "Even when he broke my heart, part of me realised he was hurting too."

Michael looked away briefly then, jaw tightening. Because that part was true. Those five years had nearly destroyed him too.

"I loved him before he hurt me," Melissa continued quietly. "And I loved him afterward." A small smile touched her lips. "Unfortunately for me."

Michael huffed out a quiet laugh at that before lifting her hand to his mouth and pressing a kiss against her knuckles almost absently. The gesture was so instinctive. So practiced. So full of affection. Amy's expression softened immediately.

"That's actually ridiculous," she murmured.

Melissa smiled. "It gets worse."

"Mum."

"Your father still follows me around the house."

"I do not."

"You absolutely do."

Michael looked entirely unapologetic. "I like my wife."

Amy groaned dramatically. "You're both insane."

But she was smiling when she said it. Because suddenly so many things made sense. The way her father still looked at Melissa like she was the centre of the room.

The way Melissa softened whenever Michael touched her. The way thirty years together hadn't dulled whatever existed between them. If anything, it seemed deeper now. Quieter perhaps. But stronger.

Michael's thumb brushed slowly across Melissa's fingers before he looked at Amy again, his expression turning serious.

"That's why I'm hard on Derek," he admitted quietly. "Because when you love someone that much…" His jaw tightened slightly. "They gain the ability to destroy you."

Melissa's expression softened immediately. Amy looked at him silently. Then after a moment she moved across the sofa and hugged him tightly again. Michael wrapped an arm around her automatically, holding her close against his chest.

"You're a little dramatic, Dad," she whispered gently. "But you have to trust me that I know my own heart."

Michael kissed the top of her head.

"I will try," he said quietly. "But you will always be my little girl."

Amy smiled against him.

"I know." She pulled back slightly, her eyes warm. "And I love you for it." Then softer still, "But I love Derek too."

Michael closed his eyes briefly like that statement physically pained him. Melissa hid a smile behind her wine glass. Amy laughed softly before leaning down to kiss her father's cheek.

"You'll survive this, Dad."

"No promises."

She grinned before crossing to Melissa and hugging her tightly too.

"Thanks, Mum."

Melissa kissed her temple gently. "Just be happy, sweetheart."

Amy smiled one last time before leaving the room. The moment the doors closed behind her, silence settled over the living room again.

Warm.

Intimate.

Familiar.

Michael remained seated for a few seconds staring into the fire before finally exhaling heavily. Melissa watched him over the rim of her glass with obvious amusement.

"You handled that surprisingly well."

Michael looked at her flatly. "I hated every second of it."

Melissa laughed softly. God, he still loved that sound. Michael stood and crossed the room toward her slowly, deliberately, until she had to tilt her head back slightly to look up at him.

Thirty years later, the man still had the ability to make her heart beat faster with a single look. His hands slid around her waist, pulling her gently into his arms as he stopped in front of the sofa. Melissa rested her hands lightly against his chest.

"You frightened Derek," she informed him.

"Good."

"Michael."

"He touched her hand three hundred times during dinner."

Melissa smiled faintly. "You used to touch me constantly too."

"That was different."

"How?"

"Because you were mine."

The possessiveness in his voice should not still affect her after three decades of marriage. And yet somehow it did.

Melissa shook her head softly. "You're impossible."

Michael's expression gentled as he looked down at her.

"No," he said quietly. "Just in love with my wife."

Emotion tightened unexpectedly in her chest.

After everything…

After all the years…

He still said things like that.

Melissa touched his face gently, her fingertips brushing the silver now threaded through his dark hair.

"You know," she said softly, "there were times after you left that I thought I would never survive it."

Pain flickered immediately across his face.

"Melissa—"

"But then you came back," she continued quietly. "And somehow…" Her eyes softened. "You loved me enough for both of us until I could trust you again."

Michael's arms tightened around her waist.

"I never stopped loving you," he said roughly.

"I know."

His forehead rested briefly against hers. The fire crackled softly in the background while rain continued tapping against the windows of the London estate.

Home.

Family.

Love.

Everything they almost lost. Michael lifted his head slightly before kissing her slowly. Not rushed. Not desperate.

Just deep and familiar and full of thirty years of love. Melissa melted into him instantly. When the kiss ended, Michael kept her close, his hand sliding into her hair.

"I love you," he murmured against her lips.

Melissa smiled softly.

"I know."

Michael narrowed his eyes slightly. She laughed quietly and kissed him again before whispering,

"And I love you too. I always will."

For a moment Michael just looked at her. Like he still couldn't quite believe she was really there.

Still his.

Still loving him after all this time.

Then he kissed her again like thirty years had changed absolutely nothing at all.

— The End —

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